

Japanese Artists' Responses to COVID-19: A Mass Revival of the *yōkai* Amabie

Klara HRVATIN*

The art is of course powerless against the virus, but with the drawing of Amabie we can console ourselves that we have at least contributed a little.

(Junya Kono, prominent Kyoto-based Japanese *yōkai* artist, in Alt 2020)

Abstract

Artists are responding very differently to the COVID-19 around the world. In Japan, this has been manifested in artistic production of the mythical creature called Amabie, one of the *yōkai*. Most often, it appears as a mermaid, with both animal and human features recognizable by its three limbs, long hair, beak-like mouth and body covered by scales. This is a mythical character which, according to legend, allegedly predicted the plague and advised people to share drawings of its image with each other, thus protecting them from diseases. The character was documented for the first time in 1846 in one of the early *kawaraban* newspapers.

This paper presents a new wave of Amabie that overran social media when COVID-19 seriously affected Japan. The author focuses on the world of art, where the character distinctly stepped to the fore, and examines the characteristics of Amabie's interpretation by selected artists. One of the first to attract special attention in this respect is the artist Shigeru Mizuki (1922–2015), a master of the *yōkai* genre, whose comic book featuring Amabie was revived in the midst of the pandemic. He was followed by other illustrators, designers and artists or groups of artists. Utilization of the character of Amabie as a talisman, however, is specific not only of the artists' domain. The mass popularization of the character, including drawings, puppets, paper sculptures, costumes, sweets, tattoos and the like can be followed through all kinds of social media. The paper attempts to lay stress on the phenomenon of the struggle of Japanese society with COVID-19 through the prism of popularizing Amabie folklore, which has become in the last few months an internet meme and mascot of pop culture that has spread around the entire world.

Keywords: *yōkai*, Amabie, COVID-19, art, folklore, popularization

* Klara HRVATIN, PhD, Lector and Assistant Professor,
Department of Asian Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana.
Email address: klara.hrvatini@ff.uni-lj.si



Odziv japonskih umetnikov na COVID-19: masovna ožvitev *yōkaija* Amabie

Izvleček

Umetniki so se po svetu na COVID-19 različno odzvali. Na Japonskem je do izraza prišla umetniška produkcija lika, enega od *yōkaijev* ali bajeslovnega bitja po imenu Amabie. Navadno se pojavlja kot morska deklica tako z živalskimi kot človeškimi potezami, prepoznavna je po treh okončinah, dolgih laseh, kljunčkastih ustih in luskastem telesu. Gre za lik morske deklice, ki naj bi po legendi napovedal pojav kuge in ljudem naročil, naj delijo risbe z njegovo podobo, ki jih bo obranila bolezn. Lik je bil prvič dokumentiran v enem izmed zgodnjih časopisov *karwaraban* iz leta 1846.

Prispevek bo predstavil fenomen novega vala pojavljanja lika Amabie, ki je preplaval družbene medije, ko je COVID-19 resneje prizadel Japonsko. Avtorica se bo osredotočila na svet umetnosti, kjer je lik prišel najbolj do izraza, in preučila značilne interpretacije lika pri izbranih umetnikih. Eden prvih, ki je prišel do izraza, je umetnik Shigeru Mizuki (1922–2015), mojster žanra *yōkai*, čigar lik Amabie v obliki stripa je oživel sredi pandemije. Sledila so dela drugih ilustratorjev, oblikovalcev in umetnikov ali skupin umetnikov. Uporaba lika Amabie kot talismana pa ni značilna samo za umetnike. Na družbenih medijih lahko spremljamo njegovo množično popularizacijo v različnih upodobitvah, vključno z risbami, lutkami, papirnatimi skulpturami, kostumi, slaščicami, tetovažami in podobno. Članek želi izpostaviti fenomen soočanja japonske družbe s COVID-19 skozi prizmo popularizacije folklorne Amabie, ki je v zadnjih mesecih postala spletna meme in maskota pop kulture.

Ključne besede: *yōkai*, Amabie, COVID-19, umetnost, folklor, popularizacija

Introduction

The mythical creature Amabie アマビエ took over social media in the spring of 2020, and slowly become a Japanese symbol for COVID-19. Amabie was supposedly one of the versions of Amabiko アマビコ (known also by the inscriptions 海彦, 尼彦, 天日子, 天彦, あま彦), *Amahiko-nyūdo* 尼彦入道 and *Arie* アリエ, whose depictions include characters similar to a bodiless monkey or bird, usually with three limbs. The first related tweet appeared on February 27, when it appeared on *yōkai* artist Orochidō's¹ 大蛇堂 page with a contemporary image of the Amabie character, and this reportedly aroused renewed interest in the Amabie character and inspired for similar art and posts (*Mainichi shinbun* 2020c; Furukawa and Kansaku 2020, 532). The Amabie character has been part of a rich Japanese cultural tradition since at least 1846—when its first

1 Orochidō (大蛇堂) is the name of the artist, but this also serves as the name of the store specializing in *yōkai* hanging scrolls, managed by the artist (see *Orochidō* 大蛇堂).

descriptions appeared along with a legend that gives both Amabie and sharing its image the power of a talisman for the prevention of infectious diseases. The first publications of Amabie appeared and spread in one of the earliest newspapers, *karwaraban* (瓦版), which were woodblock-printed bulletins that contained news, rumours, and gossip (Furukawa and Kansaku 2020, 531). More recently it reappeared during the struggle against COVID-19. This second wave spread by sharing the Amabie character through social media, and can be understood as a contemporary version of the previous newspaper version. In a very short period of time interest in the character revived: from a few tweets on March 1st 2020 there were already some 46,000 tweets at the peak of the phenomenon on March 15th, followed by approximately 10,000 to 20,000 per day in April (Furukawa and Kansaku 2020, 532). The mass revival of Amabie on social media is associated primarily with the period when Japan ordered the closure of the schools as well as the postponement of the 2020 Olympics due to the severity of the spread of COVID-19.

In a short time, the image of Amabie in the role of talisman completely overtook Japan. It was used as a symbol and logo on posters and warnings issued by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare against the spread of the COVID-19 (see figure 1). It could be seen in artistic works by illustrators, designers and artists, in many cases depicted in a very innovative way. Likewise, the icon was widely and universally disseminated, and could be seen almost everywhere: in the form of drawings in Japanese kindergartens (see Furukawa and Kansaku 2020, 532), or as paper sculptures and traditional dolls (NHK World-Japan), as well as in other forms. Its appearance and integration into the lives of the Japanese was also linked to market demand, as images of Amabie as a talisman were sold in temples, pastry shops, coffee shops, tattoo parlours, and more. Therefore, on July 7th 2020, companies applied to register more than 10 trademarks associated with Amabie, which subsequently triggered several problems as they could be used for profit (*Mainichi shinbun* 2020b).



Figure 1. A poster by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare with the character of Amabie.² (Source: Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare 2020).

The following article examines the current phenomenon of the Amabie character and its use in the visual arts, whether in graphics, design, painting, industrial design, architecture, and beyond, from the figure's inception to its popularization. Its evolution under the pens of various designers and artists will also be scrutinized. Some of the questions we will try to answer are: How and in what way did the second wave of the figure's appearance come about, compared to the first wave that spread through print? What expressive power has the character of Amabie, with its legendary message of *draw me and share*, acquired in the 21st century, and which artists have been most successful in its expansion? We will also try to understand and explain the various aspects of the figure's use in Japanese art, examining what the spread of Amabie offers and what characterizes it as a social phenomenon significant for the period of COVID-19 in Japan?

The author will first provide insight into the early sources on the subject of the character of Amabie, on the first wave of its appearance. This will be followed by an analysis of sources of the second wave of the character as used in the visual arts; firstly, through the publications of selected artists in Japanese newspapers, as well as through social media such as Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. Personal communication with some of the Japanese artists who have used the

2 The poster is entitled *STOP! Kansen Kakudai 感染拡大- COVID-19* (Stop the Spread of COVID-19 Infections) with the character of Amabie. The top title, which carries the message *Shiranai uchi ni, hiromechaukara* 知らないうちに、拡めちゃうから (Because it is spreading without knowing it) on this poster, is available from the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare in countless versions with various warning messages.

character of Amabie and are conscientious and cooperative in the dissemination of the Amabie character, such as Yūhei Takada, and Fusao Hasegawa and Shunsuke Satake will be essential in examining these issues subject.

The Origin of Amabie

Sources explaining the origin of the character of Amabie are rare. We are surprised by their small number, particularly with regard to academic articles. Eishun Nagano 長野栄俊 (1971–), an Amabie expert, Director of the Fukui Prefecture Archives in Fukui Prefecture, presents a rare but detailed study of the various illustrations of the Amabie character, the frequency of their appearance, and the Japanese places where a particular version of the figure has allegedly appeared. The only surviving document showing the earliest Amabie monster—with the image of Amabie—is a *karwaraban*, a print on wooden or clay blocks. This was a commercial newspaper from the Edo period that in 1615 began to report on natural disasters, fires, local events such as suicides due to unrequited love, as well as on revenge stories, gossip and festivals, while in the 19th century it also dealt with political topics (Johnson 2018, 1–5; Wada n.d.; Steele 2003, 1–13). It was printed on a cheap type of wood; compared to the cheap *ukiyo-e* prints, the *karwaraban* prints were even cheaper, printed on thinner paper, often in one colour only, and usually done by less specialized master engravers.³ The *karwaraban* with the impression of Amabie and the attached text is from 1846 (see figure 2). The inscription on the right alongside the picture of Amabie on the left speaks of the legend of Amabie appearing in Higo Province (present-day Kumamoto Prefecture). After a glowing object allegedly appeared a couple of times in the sea in the evening hours, a city official made it for the shore to investigate (Furukawa and Kansaku 2020, 531). With long hair, a beak-like mouth, covered with scales from the neck down, and three limbs, Amabie said to him: “I live in the sea. My name is Amabié. Good harvest will continue for six years. At the same time disease will spread. Draw me and show me to the people as soon as possible.” (ibid.) A date is also written next to the inscription, specifically the year Kōka 3 (1846, mid-May) (ibid.).

This is, of course, not the only character used during major epidemics in the distant past. In view of its mermaid/merman-like figure, Amabie has many cognate creatures, differing from them by the place, time of appearance and shape, and different names, such as Amabiko アマビコ or 天日子, Amahiko 尼彦, あま彦 or 天彦, Amahiko-Nyūdō 尼彦入道, Amahiko-no-mikoto 天日子尊, Arie ア

3 See more on *karwaraban* in Wada (n.d.); Steele (2003, 1–13); Salter (2006, 58–60).

リエ, and others. It is said, however, that Amabie most resembles the figure of Amabiko アマビコ. According to Eishun Nagano, who studied various prints from the 1844–1882 period with characters similar to Amabie (see Nagano 2005, 22) (see figure 3), Amabie is supposed to be the same character as Amabiko, where during the recording of Amabiko アマビコ an erroneous transcription of the name occurred: the syllable for katakana *ko* (コ) was wrongly converted into *e* (エ), which changed the recording of the character into Amabie アマビエ (see *ibid.*, 4). Considering various individual prints, it appeared most often in different images in the areas of the present-day Kumamoto and Miyazaki Prefectures and in the north in the area of the modern-day Niigata Prefecture (which at that time did not include Sado Island).



Figure 2. The image of Amabie, printed in the *kawaraban* newspapers during the Edo period or, to be more precise, in 1846. (Source: *Wikipedia* s.d.c.)



Figure 3. The picture above depicts a variant of Amabiko 尼彦, on a print from the early Meiji period (1871), which allegedly appeared in the area of modern-day Kumamoto Prefecture. (Source: *Wikipedia* s.d.)

Yōkai researchers also refer to them as to prophetic beasts or *yogenjū* (予言獣) (Nagano 2005, 9). The artistic staging of *yōkai* dates back to the 12th century, although the term *yōkai* for spirit, a strange apparition or phantom, was only used from the Meiji period onwards (Komatsu 2001, 451). Instead of the name *yōkai*, terms such as *oni* (才二, devil), *oni* (鬼, demons), *bakemono* (化け物, ghosts or monsters) (*Nihon ōyō shinri gakkai* 2020, 74) had previously been used. Yasumura Toshinobu underlines that they were most characteristic of the genre known as *jigoku-e* (地獄絵, paintings of hell) or the genre of the images illustrating hell; these function as the source of the images and the source of what we nowadays denote as *yōkai* (*Waraku nipponbunka no iriguchi magajin* 2017). The paintings also began to appear among the annals of Japanese paintings in the 12th century under

the influence of the flourishing of Buddhism, used to attract new believers. Images of subsequently named *yōkai* can be found in *bekiya-e* (辟邪絵, Extermination of Evil), a type of image depicting traditional Asian deities persecuting evil (see Banzato 2017, 15). In the first place, however, the Edo period should be set out, in which drawing of *yōkai* became the domain of numerous artists. Let us also mention the famous *ukiyo-e* artist Toriyama Sekien (1712–1788), who marked the domain of the *yōkai* with four collections of illustrations.⁴ These “illustrated encyclopaedias” (*Nippon* 2017) were to stimulate the popularity of *yōkai* in Japan, and many renowned artists showed their imaginations by depicting them. Of particularly great influence are the works of Hokusai, Kuniyoshi and Hokusai’s pupil Takai Kozan, who in his later years devoted himself exclusively to drawing pictures of the *yōkai*.

Kazuhiko Komatsu 小松和彦 (1947–), the Japanese anthropologist and professor of *yōkai* studies⁵ has underlined that during the COVID-19 pandemic the Japanese were in a similar situation as in the Edo period, when they not only traditionally but also cathartically drew *yōkai*, which supposedly transferred their fears from their subconsciousness to the paper (Kuhn and Kobayashi 2020). Pandemics and new diseases often spread havoc among the population, which drove them to seek new hope. Moreover, people became aware that *yōkai* do not in fact exist but were created by humans, so they actually began to enjoy looking at them (*ibid.*). Thus, all appearances of the Amabie mermaid character reflect the deadly epidemics occurring in Japan in the second half of the 19th century, and the Japanese supposedly believed that they were able to chase away evil spirits with the aid of images that represented good spirits—*yōkai* in the form of prophetic saviours who make a brief appearance, make a prophecy, then disappear. As we can see with Amabie, newspapers and their illustrations spread such images which people were to hang in their homes as protection against diseases (*Yokai – the online database* 2020).

The character of Amabie reminds us, with its image and particularly the beak and the eye area, of the protective clothing worn by doctors treating the plague during the 17th century. The image, which was presumably characteristic mainly of continental Europe (France and Italy) and illustrates the probably negative image of the doctor treating this particular disease, a man with a long waxed dress, a stick, gloves and a beaked mask, into which certain things were to be

4 These are *Gazu hyakki yagyō* (1776), *Konjaku gazu zoku hyakki* (1779), *Konjaku hyakki shūi* (1781) and *Hyakki tsurezure bukuro* (1784).

5 Kazuhiko Komatsu is also the project leader in designing the *yōkai* database, i.e. the Kaii-Yōkai Denshō Database (怪異・妖怪伝承データベース), published on the website of the International Research Center for Japanese Studies. It is a database of *yōkai* and stories from Japanese folklore.

inserted that would protect him—according to popular belief—from infection (see figure 4). These things were predominantly strongly scented herbs that were believed to purify the air, hence providing a layer of protection between the infected and the doctor (Blakemore 2020). Plague physicians wearing beaked masks and the aforementioned attire became an icon mostly in Italy. Their costume was later also used in theatre, in the comedy of improvised dialogues known as *commedia dell'arte*, and has remained a traditional mask, or *Medico della peste*, at the Carnival of Venice to this day (Boeckl 2000, 27). Even in 2020, we were able to witness it prior to the announcement of the festival being suspended on February 24 (Blakemore 2020). Some writers are convinced that the character of Amabie is closely associated with the character of the physician, and that images of the latter made it to Japan, so that he was also well known to people there (Thornton 2020).



Figure 4. Depiction of a 17th century plague doctor. (Source: *Wikipedia* s.d.a.)

A similar symbolism and communication capacity as carried by Amabie is known in Slovenia, too. This is Saint Roque, who is revered as a great protector against the plague (people also turn to him for snake bites, cholera and pain in the knees and legs). He is depicted in pilgrim costume, with a pilgrim's staff and pumpkin, while his coat with a seashell is also a characteristic feature. He has a visible wound on his thigh, to which he points with his hand, and this wound is characteristic of the bubonic plague (Dugac 2000, 100; Kuret 1989, 593). Beside him a dog with bread stands, and at times he is also depicted with an angel carrying medicines for the infected. He is often drawn with St. Sebastian, who is also a protector against the plague; he, too, is depicted with an angel carrying a container of medicines to an infected patient. In addition to St. Roque, we know of many other patron saints of the plague in Slovenia. There are believed to be as many as seventeen of them, including the Saints Charles of Borromeo, Aloysius Gonzaga, Francis of Assisi, Gregory the Great and Joseph Cottolengo. The worship of St. Roque was especially visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the form of prayer (*Franciscan Brothers* 2020; *Catholic Church* 2020). However, we can draw no direct parallel between him and the prevalence of the character of Amabie as a talisman.

The Second Wave of Amabie: The Appearance of the Character in Fine Art

Shigeru Mizuki's Amabie and Its Influence on Manga Illustrators

One of the artists or producers that exerted a decisive influence on the revival of Amabie's character is Mizuki Production, which shared on Twitter the character of Amabie by the late manga artist Shigeru Mizuki 水木しげる (1922–2015). Mizuki loved to draw the *yōkai* and reshaped them in his own way to make them more popular. This particular manga artist and historian is known, *inter alia*, for a manga series created in 1960, *GeGeGe no Kitarō* (ゲゲゲの鬼太郎), originally known as *Kitarō of the Graveyard* (墓場鬼太郎, Hakaba Kitarō) (see Papp 2010, 47, 57). The series is distinguished by the popularization of the *yōkai*, which act as the main protagonists, with the story relating to the early 20th century Japanese folk tales which had originally been staged as *kamishibai*.⁶ The work is also known in the form of anime, video games, and other media. On March 17, 2020, Mizuki Production shared Mizuki's illustration of Amabie in pen and India ink, with a call for the COVID-19 situation

6 The culture of *kamishibai* has become very popular in Slovenia in recent years, particularly since 2013, when it was part of the storytelling festival *Fairy Tales of Today* in Ljubljana (see Cvetko 2018).

to improve (*Sankei News* 2020). In the two days after the character was posted on Twitter, the image was apparently shared as many as a hundred thousand times. Amabie was also in constant demand in Mizuki Shigeru Kinenkan (the museum dedicated to the artist), based in Sakaiminato, the Tottori Prefecture in western Japan, Mizuki's birthplace. A panel dedicated to Amabie in the exhibition space on traditional Japanese *yōkai* was now placed near the entrance to the museum, where it attracted numerous visitors to enter and explore the works on display (*FNN* 2020).

With this other manga artists were enticed to join the new wave of Amabie's popularity in the country and to publish their illustrations on social media with hashtags such as “「#みんなのアマビエ」 (#Amabie for everyone)” and “「#アマビエチャレンジ」 (#Amabie Challenge)”, such as the manga artist Mari Okazaki おかざき真里 (1967–) with a colourful cartoon version of Amabie, as well as an anonymous manga artist, illustrator and designer with the pseudonym Chica Umino 羽海野チカ (1966–), Junji Itō 伊藤潤二 (1963–), the famous horror manga writer with a darker black and white version of Amabie, the manga writer Keiichi Tanaka 田中圭一 (1962–), and the manga writer and video game creator Shin'ichi Hiromoto ヒロモト森一 (1966–) (*Minna no Amabie* 2020), probably best known for his Star Wars comic book. Hiromoto widened the character of Amabie, linking it with the illustration of the mascot of the city of Taman (Kumamoto Prefecture) called “Tama Nyan”, and incorporated both in eight illustrations (*Tamana City* 2020). The works of the main representatives of the manga genre, including those listed above as well as manga artists such as Rieko Saibara 西原理恵子 (1964–), Hiroko Matsuda 松田洋子 (1964–), Noriko Nagano 永野のりこ, Katsuya Terada 寺田克也 and Momota Nakahara なかはら桃太, were combined with works by other artists in the publication *Minna no Amabie* (みんなのアマビエ, Our Amabie), published in May 2020 (*Minna no Amabie* 2020).

Freelance Illustrator Shunsuke Satake and Freelance Artist Fusao Hasegawa

More examples could probably be mentioned, and not just limited to the world of manga art, as the Amabie character became familiar in all kinds of art forms. Hereinafter, we shall present two artists whose drawings of Amabie, outside the style and depictions of manga illustrations, were among the first to appear and take over social media in Japan. The front cover of *Minna no Amabie* was made by the freelance illustrator Shunsuke Satake サタケシユンスケ (1981–), lecturer at Kyoto University of Art and Design and some other schools of design, as well as member of the illustration unit Nariyuki Circus

(なりゆきサーカス), who likes to present his illustrated works of stylized animals. Even prior to the wave of Amabie's appearances after the publication of Shigeru Mizuki's work, he published his own version of Amabie (figure 5), which turned out to be a great success. After getting acquainted with Amabie in early March 2020, he himself, as a creator, wished to make a product that would contribute to a positive attitude in the current situation in Japan and around the globe. Quite unexpectedly, he got responses immediately after sharing it on the Internet, but was soon noticed by domestic as well as foreign online media. Here, an important role was also played by "Spoon&Tamago",⁷ a website on Japanese art and design culture. After that, Satake's illustration of Amabie became very popular on Instagram, and spread into the world of international illustrators and was published in the *New Yorker* in early April 2020. The author received payment for his illustration, but decided to donate the money to the Coronavirus Prevention Fund and for anti-corona measures (*Shingata koronauirusu kansenshō: Kakudai bōshi katsudō kikin* 新型コロナウイルス感染症：拡大防止活動基金). At the same time, he was given an offer to commercialize the drawing and orders for a poster from Thailand, and also contacted by journalists from England and Spain. The commercialization of the image was further extended to the Amabie pandemic prevention project (*Amabie ekibyō taisan purojekuto* アマビエ疫病退散プロジェクト),⁸ which with the aid of Heso Productions Co. enabled production of several articles with the illustration of Amabie produced by Satake. These are sold on the website operated by Heso Productions Co. Ltd.⁹

These items are predominantly small magnets, folders, face masks, T-shirts and cups, and the selection sold on online will expand in the future. The author also upgraded his collaboration with the firm Sakura Crepas and designed crayon boxes. Satake has explained in detail his success and the amount of money he has been able to donate from the income derived from this illustration to various

7 "Spoon&Tamago" ("Japanese art, design and culture") is an international blog with its bases in New York and Tokyo. It was created in 2007 by the artist and writer Johnny Waldman. It is characterized by its ability to cover, with the aid of an international perspective, various aspects of Japanese design, from fine art, architecture and graphic design to arts and crafts.

8 For more details about the project see the artist Satake's website (Heso Productions 2020). The project's main goals are to support activities that would enable donations given to doctors, nurses and volunteers taking part in anti-COVID measures, while it also wishes to create new jobs for domestic producers, and as an individual artist Satake is striving to positively contribute to society with his work. Twenty percent of the proceeds from product sales are intended for the Japanese Red Cross Society (Heso Productions 2020).

9 Heso Productions Co. Ltd. is a company focusing on the planning, production and sale of original products.

institutions working to alleviate the consequences of COVID-19, such as the Japanese Red Cross and Yahoo, on his website (Heso Productions 2020). In this way, the artist achieved secondary promotion, which means that he did not directly advertise his works, but acquired numerous customers through the recognition of his Amabie illustration.



Figure 5. Satake, illustration of Amabie. (Source: Satake 2020)

From the list of young contemporary artists who produced image of Amabie let us also mention Fusao Hasegawa¹⁰ 長谷川維雄 (1988–). He has been proclaimed an “artist of the next generation” (*BS Fuji* 2018), and attracts much attention with his style of reproductions of famous Western and Japanese works, into which

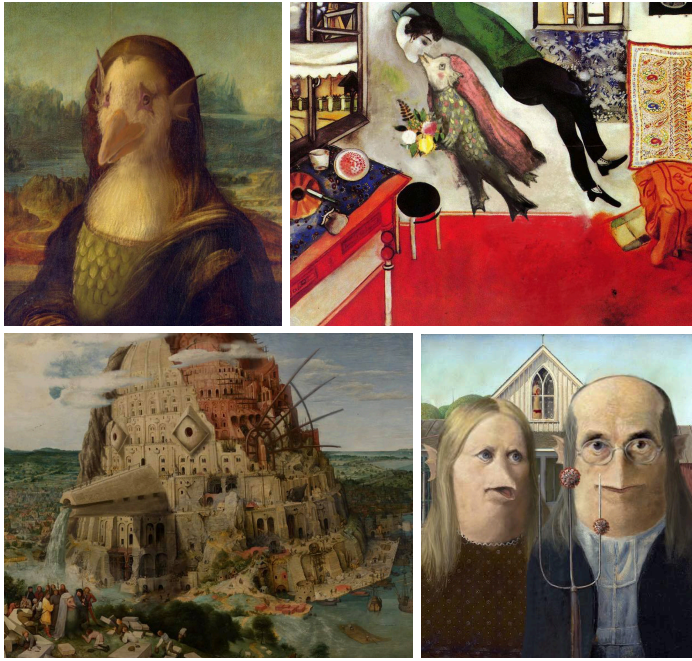
10 Fusao Hasegawa is well recognized for his massive production of plastic coloured cones of the statues of Jizō (地藏), a very popular Buddhist deity, protector of children and travellers. He has erected the statues of Jizō in various cities in Japan. He is also known for his installations emitting the sound of harbingers of summer, the *semi* (cicada), when their sound has faded at the end of the summer, thus conjuring up a feeling of summer among people (Fusao Hasegawa, message to the author, August 24, 2020).

he included the Amabie motif. These works, named the *Series of Processed Images* (*Kakō gazō shirīzu* 加工画像シリーズ) (Hasegawa, Fusao, message to the author, August 20, 2020), are characterized by the inclusion of the character of Amabie as an authorial intervention into already existing well known works of art.¹¹ This is a corpus of 17 works with no special individual titles. Hasegawa created the series gradually, one work per day, both to hope for better times and as practice during self-isolation, using an iPad app called Procreate (ibid.) as a tool. In this way he used works such as the *Mona Lisa* (Leonardo da Vinci), *Birthday* (Marc Chagall), *The Birth of Venus* (Sandro Botticelli), *The Persistence of Memory* (Salvador Dalí), *American Gothic* (Grant Wood) and *Sunflowers* (Van Gogh). As far as Japanese works are concerned, a major intervention was made especially into *Hyakki Yagyō Emaki* 百鬼夜行図巻 (*Night Parade of One Hundred Demons Picture Scroll*)¹² (see figures 11, 12) and into a work by Yoshimoto Nara.

Amabie's character replaces either an already given character, object or person in a well-known work of art (see figures 6–9), as observed in the author's intervention into *The Tower of Babel* (Pieter Bruegel the Elder), or is newly incorporated in the work's composition, such as in *Sunflowers* (Van Gogh), *The Milkmaid* (Johannes Vermeer) and *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans (Premonition of Civil War)* (Salvador Dalí) (see figure 10). The latter approach is best expressed in the intervention into the Japanese work *Hyakki Yagyō Emaki* 百鬼夜行図巻 (*Night Parade of One Hundred Demons Picture Scroll*) with the already original staging of the *yōkai* costume parade, to which Hasegawa adds Amabie and a simplified illustration of the structure of the virus (see figures 11 and 12).

11 His figures of Amabie have not become as recognizable as Satake's illustration (for now at least), but are certainly extremely prominent on social networks like Facebook.

12 For more on painted scrolls *Hyakki Yagyō*, see Nicolae (2015).



Figures 6–9 (from left to right). Fusao Hasegawa, from the *Kakō gazō shirīzu* series (2020), author's intervention into the *Mona Lisa* (Leonardo da Vinci) (fig. 6, upper left); *Birthday* (Marc Chagall) (fig. 7, upper right); *The Tower of Babel* (Pieter Bruegel the Elder) (fig. 8, bottom left); and *American Gothic* (Grant Wood) (fig. 9, bottom right).¹³ (Source: Fusao Hasegawa)



Figure 10. Fusao Hasegawa, from the *Kakō gazō shirīzu* series (2020), author's intervention in the work *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans (Premonition of Civil War)* (Salvador Dalí, 1936).¹⁴ (Source: Fusao Hasegawa)

13 It is most often the author's intervention where the character of Amabie replaces an already given character, person or object in a well-known work of art.

14 The character of Amabie is added: in the left corner there is a plastic container with disinfectant or



Figure 11. *Hyakki Yagyō Emaki* 百鬼夜行図巻 (*Night Parade of One Hundred Demons Picture Scroll*). (Source: Wikipedia s.d.b.)



Figure 12. Fusao Hasegawa, from the *Kakō gazō shirizu* series (2020), author's intervention in the work of *Hyakki Yagyō Emaki* 百鬼夜行図巻 (*Night Parade of One Hundred Demons Picture Scroll*).¹⁵ (Source: Fusao Hasegawa)

soap, merged with the image of clouds.

15 The original (see figure 11) presents a scroll depicting phantoms in the form of pots and water heaters. The original story evolved from a tale from the Muromachi period. The character of Am-bie and an illustration of the structure of the virus used by the media around the world are added to Hasegawa's work.

Tendency of Displaying and Treating the Character of Amabie in Japanese Museums, Galleries and Online Galleries

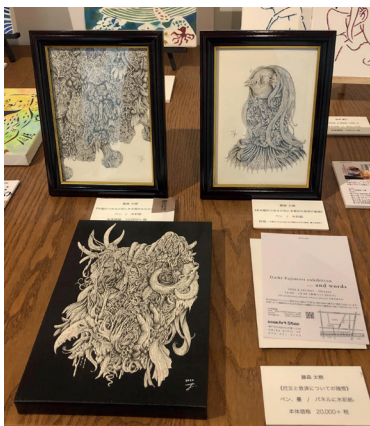
There are numerous artists who have dealt with the character of Amabie in their own way, and it can be said that almost every artist has tackled the character, regardless of their field. This is why we can witness its mass presentation in museums and galleries directly or indirectly dealing with Amabie. Indirectly, this can be perceived in museums dealing with the character of Amabie thematically, with an emphasis on the topics presenting the character of Amabie from the very start, as is the case of the Mizuki Shigeru Kinenkan Museum, where the first exhibited panel featuring Mizuki Shigeru's Amabie is very popular (*Mainichi shinbun* 2020a). Then there was the exhibition that was on display until August 16, 2020 at the Hyogo Prefectural Museum of History (兵庫県立歴史博物館) featuring, *inter alia*, the only surviving copy of the printed Amabie *karwaraban*, which had originally been owned by the Central Library of Kyoto University (*Imaga news* 2020). Above all, however, we should underline the growth of online galleries and exhibitions, such as the online gallery *Tower Records* (*Tower Records* 2020) and the online *Exhibition 58 Amabie* (*Gallery-58* 2020), where either exhibitions were on display or numerous authorial works on the theme of Amabie were collected, each with its own technique and dealing with a common topic—Amabie.

Among the artists on display in these exhibitions one of the central figures was Yūhei Takada 高田雄平 (1983–)¹⁶ from Hyōgo Prefecture, a follower of Shōzō Shimamoto 嶋本昭三 (1928–2013), the co-founder the first post-war radical art group Gutai (具体, or *Gutai Bijutsu Kyōkai* 具体美術協会). He excels in works made from waste materials, especially newspaper, with which he designs two- and three-dimensional objects, drawing from “Japanese mythology, dragons, mountains, mists, sunrises and sunsets” (Pirnat 2017). In figure 13 we can see a sculpture made in various design techniques of newspaper bonding, which is his most recognizable method, although square wood is also used in his work. With the symbolism of the dragon's lower part, which illustrates the COVID-19, and its upper part, which rises above the virus, he wished to embrace the situation of fighting the virus.

16 More details about his biography and main works can be found in *Art Scenes: Yubei Takada* (<https://art-scenes.net/wat-art-browsing/artists/269>).



Figure 13. Yūhei Takada, a work entitled *Futōfukutsu* 不撓不屈 (*Tenacity*) (newspaper, cardboard, square wood, wire), Kyoto Ashiya Gallery, November 2020. (Source: Yūhei Takada)



Figures 14 (on top), 15 (below, right), and 16 (below, left). Works on display within the framework of the exhibition *With Amabie Against Corona*.¹⁷ (Source: Yūhei Takada)

17 Works by the following artists are shown: Daiki Fujimoto 藤森太樹 (India ink, figure 14), Yūka 優花 (graphics, wooden engraving, figure 15), Yoshiko Okajima オカジマヨシコ (Amabie figurine, figure 16).

More evident than his participation with solo installations on the subject of Amabie is Takada's involvement in organizing a series of exhibitions titled *With Amabie Against Corona* (*Corona vs Amabie ten* コロナVSアマビエ展), where he initially invited more than 80 artists to take part. A collection of their works as a moving exhibition with the same title has been on display at various locations since March 2020, starting with a gallery in Kobe and moving on to galleries and department stores in Osaka. With a title that has become a true brand of exhibitions of this kind, one of its venues has been the Okamoto Comminca exhibition ground (岡本コミンカ), where Takada works as chief exhibition producer. The space used by designers was in May 2019 turned into a gallery (second floor) and a café (first floor). Takada himself is the crucial figure in spatial design, organization of exhibitions and creating opportunities for other artists (which in turn leads to the sale of their works), as well as in managing the café (*Mainichi shinbun* 2020d).¹⁸ This process was, of course, decisively influenced by the drawing of Amabie that was supposed to ward off the epidemic and transformed into a major “movement” (Yūhei Takada, correspondence with the author, from September 26 to December 14, 2020). The exhibitions were supplemented by various works, including ones made by children during self-isolation. He also sees a special significance of exhibitions of this kind in the fact that they include the authors' different views (*ibid.*).

Takada is enthusiastic about the spread of this phenomenon elsewhere in the world, and hopes that the works will be exhibited outside Japan as well. In the photographs (see figures 14–16) one can see three such works by three different artists from the Okamoto Comminca gallery, each representing Amabie (India ink, graphics, figurine design), with a different technique and story, where the figurine of the Amabie character (figure 16) is considered a work of art that makes a deep impression and is very popular (Yūhei Takada, correspondence with the author, from September 26 to December 14, 2020). The works were for sale, which enabled many artists to earn some money. In general, people like to purchase those works in order to help artists, and as a sign of good wishes present them to family or friends and thus spread a positive attitude towards the current situation in Japan and around the world (*ibid.*).

Conclusion

During the COVID-19 epidemic Japan saw a wave of popularization of the Amabie character—a mythical mermaid/merman that first appeared in Japan during

18 He underlines that thanks to the *yōkai* Amabie, artists have been given more opportunities to exhibit their works in spite of the current hard times that make it very difficult for exhibitions to be held.

the Edo period as a response to the severe epidemics raging in the country at that time. With the same basic statement, *draw me and share*, exchanges of images of the character on social media such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram were decisive for the rise in popularity of Amabie. One of the most prominent examples in fine art was an already existing illustration of Amabie made by the late manga artist Shigeru Mizuki (shared on Twitter along with the basic statement *draw me and share*), which encouraged other artists to take part in the presentation of Amabie. Japan soon witnessed a wave of illustrations of Amabie drawn by major manga artists born in the 1970s and after, such as Mari Okazaki, Chica Umino, Junji Itō, Keiichi Tanaka, Shin'ichi Hiromoto, Rieko Saibara, Hiroko Matsuda, Katsuya Terada and others. Such works were of course not limited to the manga genre, and with the mottos *Minna no Amabie* (#みんなのアマビエ, Our Amabie) and *Amabie charenji* (#アマビエチャレンジ, The Challenge of Amabie) many different types of artworks appeared on social media from March 2020. This paper focuses on two artists, the freelance illustrator Shunsuke Satake, whose Amabie met with a great success in Japan as well as abroad and brought the artist considerable recognition, and to the *Series of Processed Illustrations* by the artist Fusao Hasegawa, in which he included Amabie as an authorial intervention into already existing art works, particularly famous Western ones. Amabie also became a common muse of numerous exhibitions, both at actual galleries and in online galleries and exhibitions. As a phenomenon of circulating group exhibitions and a collection of artists, the paper put to the foreground the works by the artist Yūhei Takada, a follower of Shōzō Shimamoto, who organized the circulating exhibition *With Amabie Against Corona* showing his own works and those of others, as well as creating a creative space for greater participation and possibilities for artists during the pandemic.

Since a great many artists in Japan worked with the character of Amabie, it can be denoted as a “movement” (Yūhei Takada, correspondence with the author, from September 26 to December 14, 2020) as Takada puts it, that has marked the fields of fine art in both narrow and broader ways. The integral whole is hard to embrace, as the phenomenon of Amabie’s presentation is not yet complete and is still evolving. “Although everyone is dedicated to the same motif—Amabie, it is pleasant and interesting to observe how very differently it is portrayed by individual authors.”¹⁹ (Yūhei Takada, correspondence with the author, from September 26 to December 14, 2020)

In this sense, the Amabie phenomenon could be seen as an artists’ identity

19 「同じアマビエをモチーフにしていますが、作家さんによって捉え方はさまざまで、同じ作品にはならない面白さがあり見ていて楽しいです。」

movement, and understood as a kind of artistic activism, with which artists draw attention to themselves in a benevolent form (Jani Pirnat, conversation with the author, February 9, 2021). In it, we can endeavour to look for ritual values, a therapeutic role, artists' actions in a range of media responding to the crisis, although at the same time we can find ourselves baffled by the infantile attitude towards the very reproduction and sharing of a character that has evolved from a superstition into a pop-cultural phenomenon. Another thing that defines this movement is that it started, and in most cases functioned as an art movement involving the internet or "activism on the internet" (Chandler and Neumark 2005, 17), where the cultural receptivity of social media platforms played a crucial role.

Besides the benevolent side of artists' involvement in this phenomenon, we can find the appearance and integration of Amabie into the lives of the Japanese is also linked to market demand. This is a crucial aspect which also coincides with the popularization of the character in Japanese society. Amabie has acquired new dimensions from the aspect of *yōkai*, from the already existing illustration of Amabie made by the late manga artist Shigeru Mizuki which triggered massive re-productions of his work, wrapped in the "folklore" from the Edo period and bearing witness to the same pattern of behaviour as in the past—drawing and sharing Amabie, which should herald better times—except now through different media. Via online networks, and initially through the art of manga, Amabie has spread all over the world and globalized itself based on the characteristics of media transmission. As a social phenomenon of drawing and creating the same character during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the support of artists and promotional efforts, Amabie has become popular to such an extent that its image can be found virtually everywhere in Japan. Not only as a major "muse" during the pandemic in the world of art, but also with wider dimensions in the Japanese media, in print and on screen. We can also find Amabie as an illustration on T-shirts or a pattern on face masks, in the form of candy, on Happy New Year 2021 cards, as amulets that can be bought in temples, as a new character in traditional art and craft objects, and as a new role in traditional *nō* theatre, as well as in other places.

In this way we could consider the spread of Amabie as another example of Mizuki's *yōkai* characters which have long been used in the "character merchandizing business, turning them into toys, plastic dolls, cellphone cases, advertisement posters, collectables, video-game characters, designs for everyday objects like beverage and food product packaging, and even statues lining streets" (Suzuki 2005, 2202) where manga serves as a "popular medium that is viable as a commercial force" (ibid., 2203). Its different manifestations using cross-media marketing could embrace what has been termed the "thingification of media"

(ibid.), or the phenomenon where the *yōkai* leaves the manga world, from where it originated, and gets transformed into everyday objects (ibid.) to serve commercial ends. Crucial in the whole story is the importance of “Japanese media mix” (or “a popular, widely used term for the cross-media serialization and circulation of entertainment franchises” (Steinberg 2012, viii)) practices, which add to “the sense of intimacy with *yokai*” (Suzuki 2005, 2202) and as well functioning as various “business and marketing strategies” (Ötsuka and Steinberg in Suzuki 2005, 2201).

As the currently most attractive pop mascot of Japanese culture and an online meme in the COVID-19 era, Amabie has become a powerful cultural symbol, which spread even on international level, and as such globally recognized brand, which on the one hand gives Japanese people the feeling that they are connected to each other and that through distributing and buying Amabie products they are joining the collective online creation and sharing of something “positive”, while on the other hand at the same time the phenomenon is strategically intertwined and determined by market demands. It would be interesting to examine to what extent is the phenomenon of the Amabie revival based on “fakelore”, or to which extent it is “folkloresque”, and examine how its physical manifestations will integrate and expand further in the scope of tourism contents in Japan and beyond.

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